
The Cultural Work of Sejong the Great

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The Invention of the Alphabet

The alphabet project developed in the same way that the other cultural projects had: a need was identified, researchers were appointed, a final report was published, and actual publication projects using the alphabet were launched. There were only two factors that were new: Sejong himself was the chief expert and principal researcher, and the project was marked by controversy from the day it was announced.

The need for an effective Korean script must have become evident to Sejong from some of his earlier projects. For example, in 1431, in connection with the pharmacological survey, numerous Korean plants with no standard Chinese name had to be written in phonetic transcriptions using Chinese characters. An alphabet would have obviated that problem. In 1433, a survey of popular songs and ballads was conducted "in all towns and districts" by the Board of Rites, which counted music among its many responsibilities. The results of this project are not known, but surely there would have been many problems in transcribing the Korean words of the songs. Korea had a long tradition of writing Korean vernacular poetry in the phonetic medium of Chinese characters, but no consistent notation method had ever evolved even for the standard language, let alone for the dialectal needs of the "towns and districts." (Such a development had occurred in Japan, as shown by the Chinese-character-based script known as *manyōgana*. But such a development could not occur in Korea because the phonology of its language was vastly more complex than that of Japanese.)

Then there was the matter of standardizing the Korean pronunciation of Chinese characters. This question seems to have aroused considerable concern in the early Chosŏn dynasty. In 1416, in King T'aejong's time, a Korean riming dictionary, or possibly a Korean edition of a Chinese riming dictionary, had been compiled, but it evidently did not meet Korean needs, because Sejong made a renewed attack on the problem. Before he died in 1450, his chief phonological scholar, Sin Sukchu (1417-1475), had carried out at his direction studies of the phonological systems of both the Yuan and Ming dynasties, and had edited a Korean dictionary, entitled "The Correct Rimes of the Eastern Country" (*Tongguk chŏngŭn*), which was intended to define correct Sino-Korean pronunciation. All of this demonstrates on the part of Sejong not only a clear concern with Sino-Korean phonology, but also an unusual level of expertise in this very rarefied area of Chinese studies.

The Korean pronunciation of Chinese characters was an area of concern for scholars and the highly educated members of the bureaucracy. Yet they were but a small minority of the total population of Korea. What of the common people? Sejong also had their particular needs very much in mind. In 1444, in justifying his alphabet to his critics, he urged the necessity of reforming legal procedure in connection with the recording of testimony: those who could not read the complicated Chinese character transcriptions of witnesses' statements were put at a serious disadvantage, one that he proposed to rectify by using the alphabet to record the testimony in the original vernacular. And his proclamation of the alphabet in 1446 emphasized his special distress that ordinary people were unable to read or write.

This royal concern for the literacy of the common people seems to have been first manifested in 1434, on the occasion of the publication of a collection of morality tales that Sejong had

PAGE 1 of 2